THE NATIONAL CHILDREN S AGENDA AND THE ATLANTIC CAPC EXPERIENCE

LINKING VISION, ACTION, RESEARCH AND COMMUNITY PRACTICE

Submitted by:
Health Promotion and Programs Branch - Atlantic Region, Health Canada

Prepared by:
Pauline Raven, CAPC Project Representative
Madine Vanderplatt, Principal Researcher, Atlantic CAPC Regional Evaluation
Yolande Samson, Evaluation Consultant, Health Promotion and Programs Branch - Atlantic Region

September 1999

Table of Contents

Linking Vision, Action, Research and Community Practice 1

Atlantic CAPC and NCA s Six Areas of Action 2

Point One.....Putting Parents at the Centre of Planning and Action 2

Point Two.....The Importance of Supportive Communities 2

Point Three...Interdependence of the NCA s Six Areas of Action 3

Table 1. Linking Parents Experience to the NCA s Six Areas of Action 4

Atlantic CAPC: Working Together from a Position of Strength 5

Figure 1. Interaction Between Atlantic CAPC and NCA Areas of Action 6

Atlantic CAPC - Building Evidence and Taking Action 7

Conclusion 8

103-00639/

Linking Vision, Action, Research and Community Practice

This document responds to the call for feedback regarding the concepts, ideas and issues presented within National Children's Agenda (NCA) documents. It draws heavily upon the final results of the regional evaluation of Atlantic Canada's Community Action Program for Children (CAPC), as well as the preliminary results of national evaluation data.[1]

Entitled Moving Along, Growing Strong: The Final Report of the Atlantic Community Action Program for Children (CAPC) Regional Evaluation, the regional evaluation of Atlantic CAPC projects is one of the largest empowerment-oriented evaluations ever conducted in Canada.[2] Published in December 1997, this $1 million evaluation used a Participatory Action Research (PAR) model to extensively assess the work of 40 community-based organizations offering family support programs across all four Atlantic provinces. Announced in 1992 as a community-based initiative to support the well-being of children from the start of their lives through the preschool years, CAPC is jointly managed by federal and provincial/territorial governments. As the millenium closes, communities across Atlantic Canada are acknowledging CAPC's overall success.

When Atlantic CAPC representatives read the recently published NCA discussion papers and workbooks, many common themes between the NCA and CAPC were immediately evident,- even during the most cursory first read. The overall vision, aspirations and goals of the National Children's Agenda and the Atlantic Community Action Program for Children dovetail with one another. Central to the match between the NCA and CAPC is the recognition of the need to reach children before problems occur and the provision of quality early childhood experiences. The vast majority (92%) of children who participate in CAPC program are 6 years of age and under, and 32% are 2 years of age and under. As well, many CAPC sites are home to the Canada Prenatal Nutrition Program (CPNP) which links potentially vulnerable families to services before the birth of children.

Importantly, the results of regional and national CAPC evaluations are bringing forward valuable insights - worthy of careful consideration by the Federal/Provincial/Territorial Council on Social Policy Renewal. For example:

- Qualitative process data from the regional evaluation indicates Atlantic CAPC is laying a solid base for collaboration between our federal and provincial governments, as well as local communities, regarding not only the implementation of programs but also their evaluation. At the same time,

- Quantitative impact data from the national evaluation shows that CAPC is reaching and effectively supporting children living in higher risk households (e.g., low-income, lone-parent and/or low levels of high school completion by parents). This success is something universally focused initiatives have not accomplished.

As we work toward building effective strategies to support the healthy development of Canadian children and their families, evidence is building to position CAPC programs as an effective community-based and cost-effective ally to a National Children's Agenda. The following sections highlight many prevalent links between the NCA and CAPC - while introducing some insights helpful in moving present discussions forward.

---

[1] Community Action Program for Children(CAPC): National Evaluation Preliminary Findings, Spring 1999, prepared by the Community-based Programs, Childhood and Youth Division, Health Canada, in consultation with Statistics Canada.

[2] Moving Along, Growing Strong: The Final Report of the Atlantic Community Action Program for Children (CAPC) Regional Evaluation, December 1997, prepared for the Health Promotion and Programs Branch, Atlantic Region, Health Canada.

Atlantic CAPC and the NCA s Six Areas of Action

The NCA documents six interrelated areas of action where cooperative effort can have positive effects on children. These are:

1. Supporting parents and strengthening families
2. Enhancing early childhood development
3. Improving economic security for families
4. Providing early and continuous learning experiences
5. Fostering strong adolescent development
6. Creating supportive, safe and violence-free communities.

In Atlantic Canada, our experience within CAPC, along with regional evaluation data, strongly endorses increased action in all six areas. With CAPC, we have had the opportunity to closely observe and reflect upon how different project and program models work. Through this experience, we have noted three crucial points about how children, parents, families and communities can best be supported. These focus on:

1. The centrality of parents
2. The importance of supportive communities
3. The interdependence of areas of action aimed at serving children, parents and communities.

Whenever these three points are not fully considered as plans are established, both the integrity and success of projects and programs for children, parents and families are jeopardized. These points are discussed further in the sections below.

Point One... Putting Parents at the Centre of Planning and Action

Parents are the foundational piece. They are the key stakeholders.

- It is primarily parents that children turn to - in expectation of having their many needs met.
- It is parents who have the greatest overall influence on outcomes for children.

Point Two... The Importance of Supportive Communities

Parents and children thrive when their value is practically acknowledged through broad-based support.

- Communities can create positive environments where parents and their pivotal role in children s lives are valued and supported in practical, cost-effective ways.
- Supported parents and supportive communities are a necessary backdrop to healthy child development.

Point Three... Interdependence of the NCA s Six Areas of Action

While the authors of the NCA describe six key areas of action as interrelated, our experiences at CAPC, and the results of the Atlantic CAPC Regional Evaluation, underscore that these are better understood as interdependent. Success in any of these six identified areas depends on success within other areas. The cliché from a familiar song, you can t have one without the other, speaks eloquently to the relationship between the NCA s areas of action. For example:

- Enhancing early childhood is a key component of fostering strong adolescent development.
- Children and adolescents who are healthy and happy enhance parents performance and attendance in the workforce - improving economic security for families.

The Atlantic CAPC Regional Evaluation sought answers to the program s impact regarding the improvement of the health and well-being of at-risk children, aged 0-6, and their families, in Atlantic Canada. The rich data that emerged illustrates the inherent interdependency of the NCA s six areas of action. A sampling of parent quotes are summarized below (See Table 1. Linking Parents Experiences to the NCA s Six Areas of Action). Representative of over 8000 transcribed pages of interview data from the Atlantic CAPC Regional Evaluation, these three sets of quotes demonstrate:

- The interdependent relationship between all six areas of action highlighted by the NCA.
- A continuum of experiences for parents that merges their own personal development with improved family and community functioning and healthy child development.

As we examine the quotes highlighting parents experiences at CAPC, a continuum of benefits for parents, children and communities emerges. These experiences and benefits link to all NCA areas of action. The NCA s six areas of action are ordered in the table on the following page to illustrate how a particular experience, and the benefits that are incurred, may have principal links to specific areas of the NCA. However, given the interdependent nature of the NCA s six areas of action, other rankings are possible.

Table 1. Linking Parents Experience to the NCA s Six Areas of Action

What Atlantic CAPC Parents Say...	Benefits of CAPC...
I ve acquired some new friendships, some really good friendships. And they ve become really true friends. I know that they are because when I was going through a really hard time back in May, like, every one of them girls were really there for me, to help with the kids and to help me.	. Parents supporting parents at crucial points creates an overal sense of well-being and possibility. . Children witnessing support for their parent/family become part of a caring community where responsibility for, and to, others is modeled. . Difficulties within the family are less likely to result in despair and isolation as community support builds.

Links to the NCA s Six Areas of Action (possible ranking)

. Supporting parents and strengthening families
. Enhancing early childhood development
. Providing early and continuous learning experiences
. Creating supportive, safe and violence-free communities
. Fostering strong adolescent development
. Improving economic security for families

What Atlantic CAPC Parents Say...	Benefits of CAPC...
It showed me how to refrain myself when I m losing it with them. *You can t teach a child not to hit by hitting him. I went by the old school the way we were all raised and what not. It was hard not to hit him anymore...I find our relationship is a lot more laid back and he has more respect for me now...*	. Parents replace tougher disciplinary actions with effective and more peaceful child guidance practices. . Children live in a more positive, predictable and supportive environment. . Conditions within the home environment match those required for emotional well-being and lifelong learning for both parents and children.

Links to the NCA s Six Areas of Action (possible ranking)

. Enhancing early childhood development
. Creating supportive, safe and violence-free communities
. Providing early and continuous learning experiences
. Fostering strong adolescent development
. Supporting parents and strengthening families
. Improving economic security for families

What Atlantic CAPC Parents Say...	Benefits of CAPC...
She s just, it s like a flower...She just opened up...She started to find out who she was. *I learned that I have something to give. I learned that my experiences can help somebody else.*	. Child and parental self-esteem builds. . Parents recognize and celebrate their own and their children s achievements and development. . Parents/children recognize their strengths, increasing the capacity of individuals to contribute to society. . Improved child/parent(s) relationships increases the possibility of parents seeking and being successful with employment-related activities.

Links to the NCA s Six Areas of Action (possible ranking)

. Enhancing early childhood development
. Supporting parents and strengthening families
. Improving economic security for families
. Providing early and continuous learning experiences
. Fostering strong adolescent development
. Creating supportive, safe and violence-free communities

The continuum experienced by many CAPC participants -- from feeling support within the community, to changes in parenting, to the increased confidence and capacity of individuals (children/adults) -- creates positive impacts for children, families and communities. It illustrates the potential that emerges when supportive, nonjudgmental relationships and spaces are created for (and with) parents in local communities. There are strong indications that the types of supports available through CAPC can have far-reaching, long-term benefits for vulnerable children, parents and communities.

Atlantic CAPC: Working Together from a Position of Strength

The Atlantic CAPC Regional Evaluation contains convincing data about the creation of spaces that invite participation by vulnerable families. The quotes in the previous section underscore the centrality of parents and their support for one another as well as the importance of the empowerment that occurs as parents and communities strengths are acknowledged and utilized. This stands in stark contrast to more clinical and/or insular approaches to providing services, and sets CAPC apart from traditional models of services delivery. CAPC is distinct in two other ways that have important implications for the NCAs focus on creating more effective and coordinated responses to children's needs, in that CAPC:

- Draws heavily on volunteer involvement and community mobilization
- Challenges and creates change in systems.

A snapshot of volunteer activity in September 1997, gathered by national evaluators, indicates that there are 3.77 CAPC volunteers for every full or part-time staff member. Over a six-month period, national data also showed an impressive buy-in from external sources ($1 for every $6 of federal funding). For the same period, donations of goods and services such as free space, transportation, publicity, etc., added an additional $1 for every $3.6 of federal funding.

Because of limited community access to resources and services, Atlantic CAPC projects have become a pivotal piece of community infrastructure. Coordinators promote and organize joint initiatives among service organizations, interested community members and/or government agencies to address needs identified by local families. This coordinated approach to program development has been encouraged and supported from inception by federal/provincial Joint Management and Advisory Committees in Atlantic Canada.

The Atlantic CAPC Regional Evaluation provided a forum wherein governments, policy makers, university consultants, funded organizations and community members discovered the complexities and advantages of working in a truly collaborative and consultative manner. While Atlantic CAPC creates change for parents, it also creates change within existing systems and government agencies with regard to how they respond to parents and families.

> ***I was in child protection for six or seven years and after you get into a situation or field like that, eventually you begin to paint everyone with the same brush. There is no one good out there ... I had to relearn it that people are basically good or inherently good and there are a lot of parents out there, that given the right opportunities, will develop further as parents ... It [involvement with local CAPC project] has helped me relearn that regardless of our situation or condition in life, we want to do our best as parents.*** ***Service Provider***

As Atlantic CAPC projects gain momentum, additional federal and/or provincial departments as well as other organizations are approaching projects to work collaboratively on initiatives. This increased interaction holds a host of opportunities for growth and change as different partners and perspectives come together. Such collaboration can help solve the many challenges presented by changes in family structure, workplaces and the economy.

The Atlantic CAPC Regional Evaluation indicates active collaboration also affects policy and program directives. The complex, yet focused, working relationships required to complete an evaluation of 40 projects across different provincial jurisdictions provided tremendous opportunities for discussion, debate and decision-making across sectors.

The working relationship among representatives of federal and provincial departments, communities and program participants demonstrated:

- The capacity of communities to influence and inform policy development
- The effectiveness of pooling expertise and resources to achieve common goals
- The value of strategic linking between program evaluation and program/policy development.

The active collaboration among stakeholders:

- Adds new layers of analysis
- Increases accountability between sectors
- Coordinates approaches and actions
- Links research activities to local, provincial and federal decision-making.

Most notably, Atlantic CAPC evaluation activities and results have influenced the extension of family resources programs to additional communities through provincial funding initiatives.[3] Figure 1, Interaction Between Atlantic CAPC and NCA Areas of Action, shows the mobilization of individuals and communities through CAPC. It also illustrates the potential of the environment created within CAPC to address the interdependent six areas of action outlined within the NCA.

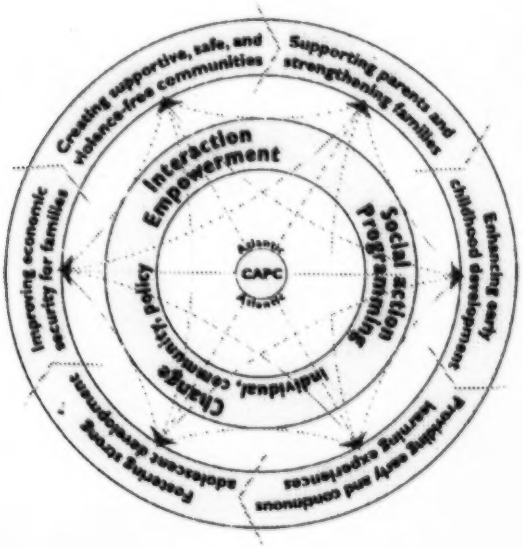

Figure 1. Interaction Between Atlantic CAPC and NCA Areas of Action

Atlantic CAPC - Building Evidence and Taking Action

---

[3] Specifically, by presenting the evaluation results to the Minister and Deputy Minister of Health and other key government officials in Newfoundland and Labrador and by developing strong working relationships with government officials who became advocates of the CAPC model within the system, the Newfoundland and Labrador government invested a portion of their National Child Benefit transfer funds to expanding the CAPC model to other communities in need. In essence, the evaluation results were used to encourage Ministers to invest in a CAPC model of programming delivered by local communities rather than by public health staff.

Atlantic CAPC projects are monitored at local, regional and national levels. The strengths of both quantitative and qualitative research methods have been applied to these activities as well as a wide range of data collection tools. This is providing rich sources of data for analysis at key points and opportunities for ongoing monitoring of CAPC s progress.

The Atlantic CAPC Regional Evaluation was designed, implemented, analyzed and reported upon through a collaborative management and decision-making structure that invited community members to the table before even preliminary steps were taken.[4] This increased opportunities for government and community representatives to learn from and better understand each other. It also increased ownership and engaged individuals, departments and organizations in a dynamic process brimming with new challenges.

The sharing of skills and perspectives among individuals, organizations and provinces during regional evaluation activities has enhanced knowledge regarding research methods and evaluation practices. Hence, in addition to monitoring the progress of CAPC projects, the Atlantic CAPC Regional Evaluation has laid a strong foundation for ongoing evaluation. Importantly, it has increased the value of evaluation among stakeholders and placed it at the centre of project and program development. Within Atlantic CAPC projects we see knowledge gained through evaluation being readily translated into action that has a more direct, immediate impact on children and their families.

The link between national evaluation activities and the National Longitudinal Study on Children and Youth (NLSCY) is also notable. The NLSCY provides a base for comparing the health and well-being of children involved with CAPC programs with children who are demographically similar but not involved. The availability of an NLSCY control group greatly enhances our ability to effectively assess CAPC s impact on key measures of healthy child development. At the first follow-up phase (completed after nine months), results point to declining levels of emotional and behavioural problems among children attending CAPC programs. The analysis of a 24-month follow-up, soon to be completed will give a more complete picture.

Atlantic CAPC projects include a plenary of non-governmental initiatives that match criteria labeled by authors of the NCA as effective practices in the area of integrated or coordinated services. Regional evaluation results indicate CAPC projects are:

- holistic
- child-centred
- focused on outcomes
- family-oriented
- community-based
- intersectoral and collaborative in terms of service delivery
- balanced in terms of prevention and intervention (with a goal of earliest possible intervention, when necessary)
- rigorously evaluated, with an emphasis on outcomes.

Atlantic CAPC projects are committed to ensuring access to effective programs for vulnerable children, families and communities. We see keeping score as an integral part of ongoing success, project/program development and evidence-based decision-making, and join the NCA s authors in the call for careful monitoring and evaluation of all initiatives aimed at improving outcomes for children.

Conclusion

[4] The Atlantic CAPC Regional Evaluation results and the collaborative process used have been the subject of recent presentations to the Canadian Evaluation Society, the American Evaluation Society, the 5th International Qualitative Health Research Conference and the Conférence internationale francophone en sciences de la santé.

CAPC is described in NCA documents as a Government of Canada initiative aimed at improving the life experiences of children. The leadership inherent in launching an initiative with such broad community development potential is commendable. It is rewarding to have evaluation results to bring to NCA discussions as evidence of successful collaboration across Atlantic Canada within this initiative.

National CAPC results are demonstrating that Atlantic Canada s 40 CAPC projects are now home to over 500 programs used by parents, children and communities to advance the health and overall development of both urban and rural children. There are strong indications that Atlantic CAPC projects are positively affecting outcomes for vulnerable children.

The response to the call by the Federal/Provincial/Territorial Council of Ministers on Social Policy Renewal for feedback regarding the NCA publications gives a preliminary review of links between CAPC and NCA concepts, ideals and issues. It invites a more detailed analysis of the value of CAPC within NCA frameworks while bringing forward insights helpful in forwarding the NCA s six areas of action.

Thirty-two of Atlantic Canada s 40 CAPC projects have engaged in an opportunity to review the importance of the NCA s six areas of action in preparation for the submission of this response linking Atlantic CAPC evaluation results and the NCA. Each of these 32 projects endorses in principle the view that the six areas of action are best understood as interdependent. And each sees the centrality of parents and the importance of supportive communities as crucial elements of the most effective path forward for the NCA.

At CAPC, we look with enthusiasm to the months ahead and anticipate strong leadership at all government levels. CAPC communities remain poised to create every possible opportunity for the advancement of the health and well-being of our children, parents and families.